



The Green Revolution

How a grumpy green giant fired off some black humour at Disney and emerged as pure box office gold.

WORDS: JAMES COTTEE

↓ VITAL STATS

SHREK (2001)



SYNOPSIS Anti-social ogre Shrek lives happily in his swamp until it is invaded by refugee fairy tale animals banished by the short but extremely vicious Lord Farquaad. Determined to win his swamp back, Shrek heads off to the palace, followed by a garrulous Donkey who won't believe he doesn't need a friend. Farquaad agrees to remove all the other fairy tale creatures if Shrek rescues the beautiful Princess Fiona from the clutches of a particularly fiery dragon. Shrek and Donkey set off on an adventure that finds danger, friendship, anguish and true love.

ON SALE 7 November, 2001

RRP \$39.95 **RATING** PG

STARRING Cameron Diaz, Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, John Lithgow

DIRECTOR Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jensen

PRODUCERS: Jeffrey Katzenberg, Aron Warner, John K Williams

WRITERS Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio, Joe Stillman, Roger SH Schulman

MUSIC Harry Gregson-Williams

Shrek hit the cinemas earlier this year with little fanfare, but it quickly became a sleeper hit in Australia and around the world. Audiences were delighted by edgy humour that poked fun at the worn-out clichés of fairy tales, and amazed by the revolutionary computer graphics that made the movie possible.

The movie was a triumph on every level, but sinister motives lurked behind the face of our favourite jolly green giant. One of the driving forces behind *Shrek* had a grudge to bear against the Disney Studios and its corporate culture. In some ways *Shrek*, despite its appeal to children everywhere, was partly an act of revenge.

There's no doubt that Walt Disney built an empire that was designed to maintain domination in the key markets of family entertainment and animation. Despite difficulties during the 1970s, when the studio found it hard to compete with wisened-up television audiences, it's re-emergence in the 1980s, beginning with *The Little Mermaid*, and plugging an invigorated formula into the video industry, was almost a license to print money. The man behind the new vision at Disney was Jeffrey Katzenberg. By giving

the Disney company movies filled with singing and dancing, heroes and heroines and their entertaining sidekicks, he gave it the power to become one of the world's six biggest entertainment companies. In return, he got nothing but grief, finally being dismissed by Disney head, Michael Eisner, under unpleasant circumstances. It was little surprise then that Katzenberg teamed up with Steven Spielberg to form their own empire, DreamWorks, where Katzenberg headed up a new animation division. His creations, such as *Antz* and *The Prince of Egypt* were distinctly different from the sugar-coated schmaltz that Disney was still successfully churning out. None of them, however, could compete with Disney's domination of the genre.

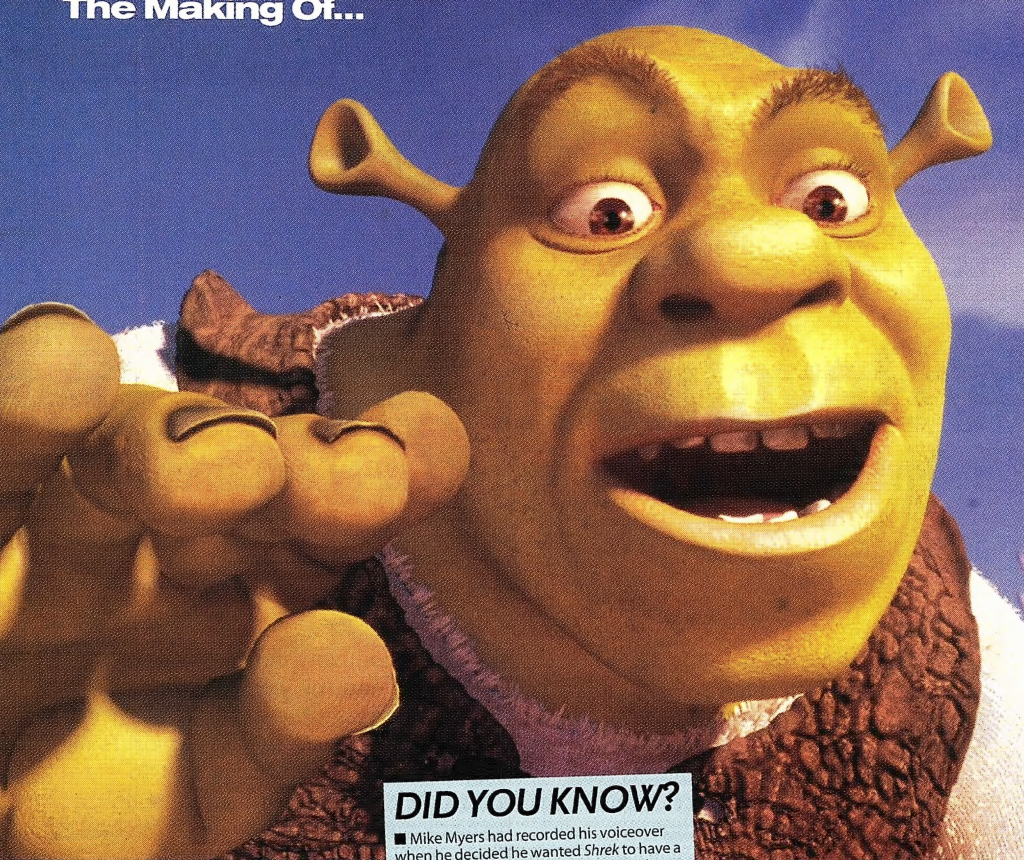
Perhaps Katzenberg's frustration was poured into *Shrek* but, whatever the creative force behind it, the movie combined a clever script, superb production values and state-of-the-art computer animation to make a killing at the box office, topping the Australian charts and nudging onto the number seven spot of our all-time highest grossing films.

Laughs and lawyers

It's not hard to see, however, how the movie was a stab at everything that Disney stands for. The ogre Shrek finds himself in a ruthlessly controlled state - a carefully ordered fantasy kingdom where minority groups are rounded up and exterminated. The oppressed masses are fantasy creatures of every kind, a subtle poke at how Disney exploits symbols of whimsy for financial gain. *Shrek's* director, New Zealander Andrew Adamson, aware of the fine line between making fun and defamation, is quick to get the facts straight on the films inspiration. "We're just parodying fairy tales." Really? "Farquaad's kingdom is a little bit different [to Disneyland]. With anything in a comedy that's a parody, you want people to get it straight away so you look for the most common popular icon."

While they may claim that any similarity to Disney's realm of fantasy is coincidence, this didn't stop DreamWorks from pushing the





DID YOU KNOW?

■ Mike Myers had recorded his voiceover when he decided he wanted *Shrek* to have a Scottish accent. DreamWorks heard a demo and had to agree with their star.

→ analogy as far as the law would allow. "We showed each and every scene to lawyers as we went along. We certainly did not want to be sued by Disney." Wise choice.

Of course, the humour in *Shrek* isn't limited to pure revenge-fantasy. The extreme gross-outs come thick and fast, all part of Adamson's intention of maximising the laughs. "I read a great article where one of the writers of *The Simpsons* said that the best kind of laugh is the one that you get when people's mouths are open in shock, because it has a whole different sound. And I agree. It's the most fun when people are laughing and they almost wish they weren't."

Some of the biggest names in comedy were involved in making *Shrek*, with Mike Myers as in the title role, Eddie Murphy as Donkey, Cameron Diaz as Princess Fiona and John Lithgow as Lord Farquaad, a ruler so ruthless he pulls the legs off the Gingerbread Man.

The collected vocal talents proved so explosive behind the mike that much of their improvisation made it onto the screen. Adamson has nothing but praise for the performances of his stars. "We had four talented comedic actors and they all own their characters. Eddie Murphy, particularly, would take a joke and keep it going. You'd end up expanding the scene to fit the joke."

Finding Shrek

Shrek is a finely polished production, for all the world appearing to be cut from whole cloth. But the movie had a long and arduous path from William Steig's children's book to the silver screen. Work was stopped completely on two separate occasions to re-assess the project and

ensure that quality was

maintained at every level.

One of the biggest problems was coming up with the look for *Shrek* himself. As director Adamson explains, "We went through probably about a hundred or so sculptors trying to find him."

"The thing we were using as a reference was a British bulldog. They're kind of ugly and yet really cute at the same time, and that's what we were after with Shrek. We had to make him recognisably ugly, but



"It's such a great story about accepting yourself for who you are" – Mike Myers



Who needs friends?



Princess Fiona meets her husband-to-be.

also appealing." In the end it was Mike Myers himself who lent the inspiration for his looks. "It was mainly the eyebrows. There's this little impish point in the eyebrows that we got from Mike."

The other actors lent recognisable traits to their on-screen characters. "With Donkey you sometimes see Eddie Murphy in the big grin. Cameron Diaz was a little easier because she and Fiona looked a little more similar. With her, though, the likeness is mainly in the gestures."

The *Shrek* project was begot partly from a reaction to Disney, but mainly to try and reinvent the tired formula of children's and adult's entertainment. Producer Jeffrey Katzenberg launched DreamWorks into the film as an antidote to the string of near-identical films he churned out for Disney. "I thought it was a pretty wicked idea, that an ogre is the hero. A big, stinky, smelly character would be the prince charming of our movie," he says. The result, without insulting or talking down to the audience, appealed to young and old.

Beastly can be beautiful

If that wasn't enough, it even had a positive message. Not overly preachy, just a common sense answer to the populist lunacy of the age. Or, as Mike Myers puts it: "It's such a great story about accepting yourself for who you are. We live in a society with a warped sense of who's beautiful and who's not, and I think the message of this movie is that everyone is beautiful." *Shrek* goes beyond the novelty of *Toy Story* to bring computer-generated cinema into the canon of "proper" filmmaking.

It's not just full CGI productions that are getting better. Traditional cel animation has benefited from new technology, with films such as *Ghost In the Shell* making the



Shrek sets out to save Princess Fiona.



The not-too fiery dragon.

leap to the digital world. Disney and others have experimented with mixing cel-based characters with CG backgrounds, to spectacular effect. Each frame still has to be drawn by human hands, but once scanned into the computers anything is possible.

Not that you'd know it from a visit to your local multiplex. What you see on the big screen isn't quite what the presentation the animators hoped for. But with DVD, the direct digital-to-digital transfer can show CGI work in all its detailed glory.

While the technology surges ahead, the biggest problem for the future of animation is public perception. Most people still think that cartoons are only for kids, a problem that the makers of *Shrek* believe they have gone a long way towards solving. Universal Home Entertainment certainly feel that *Shrek* could be their biggest DVD thus far, straddling, as it does, the key markets of the single male buyer and families eager to see just what DVD can do.

Can *Shrek* change the DVD world? The big fella, it seems, is going to give it a go. ■



↓ BUILDING A BETTER PRINCESS

In the end, CGI technology was so advanced on *Shrek*, Princess Fiona looked far too real



■ *Shrek* broke ground in the world of animation, achieving previously impossible feats of technical virtuosity. While earlier computer generated movies had concentrated on making fake environments filled with fake characters, *Shrek* gave us a living, breathing world.

Thousands of trees, rolling streams, and fires so real you could feel their warmth. All of this exhaustive detail in the environment is in stark contrast to the fantasy creatures that populated it, like the sex-mad dragon and the talking donkey with verbal diarrhoea.

Walking the line between these two extremes was Cameron Diaz's character, Princess Fiona. She went through over a hundred character designs before DreamWorks decided to move back from the ultra-realistic look she was first given. *Shrek's* supervising animator, Rama Hui, explains that this was a very deliberate choice.

"The reason we wanted to make Fiona less human-like was to make sure she could work well together with the rest of the characters. Since most of the other characters in the movie were fairy tale creatures, we made Fiona less human to blend her into the cast. That also made Shrek and Fiona falling in love visually much more acceptable. We ended up making Fiona's eyes a bit bigger than a real person and also her skin a bit smoother too."

Those who've seen the recent *The Mummy* movies will recall the amazing detail that went into creating the vivid

imagery of live, rotting mummies on screen. Beneath each artificial character's skin were accurately modelled sinew, muscle and bones. Similar techniques were used in *Shrek*, though with CGI entities as main characters the stakes were much higher.

"We used our own proprietary software to create the facial system. It's an advanced version of the facial system that we used in *Antz*, now with 500 different controls. We have all the muscles built in her face and that allows us to animate her to a very fine degree."

It's standard practice in big budget animated films to videotape the antics of the voice actors as they record their lines. This affords the animators more idea of how to make the characters come alive on screen. "We did look at a lot of the references we taped when Cameron was recording the audio. These references were very inspiring and they always helped us to push our animation. Whenever we saw something that Cameron did and fitted the movement, we would try our best to capture that in the animation."

Even Fiona's martial arts moves were authentic! "We have animators in our group who know kung fu. With that, we could talk about different moves and how we could apply that to the animation. It was really fun to do and, actually it might take less time to make a computer-generated character to really good kung fu than training a real person to do the same moves."



Cameron Diaz provided Fiona's gestures and voice.